

three little buntings, which were drinking from a small seepage zone, in this dry hilly area. I know Rajpoot personally and he is a keen birdwatcher, with a good knowledge of reptiles and mammals as well. All the other species recorded in his Karchat list had been previously recorded there. Rajpoot did not have a camera; his observations were not substantiated by any other companion, and have not been submitted for publication. All the known records of this uncommon wintering visitor to the Subcontinent have been in the far northern areas of the Himalayas. His report and lists of species are deposited in the Sindh Wildlife Board Library, open to the public. However, the record should be treated with caution and probably should not be included in a definitive Checklist.

#### 8. Indian Pied Hornbill

##### *Anthracoceros malabaricus*

Seen on March 13, 1999 in Mirpur, in Poonch by Major Erkki Kallio. This was in the area presently on the Pakistan held side of the Cease-fire line.

#### 9. Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarisomus dalhousiae*

Seen on August 21, 1999 by Major Erkki Kallio at Kotli in Poonch, presently on the Pakistan held side of the Cease-fire line.

Both these records i.e. the Indian pied hornbill and long-tailed broadbill, are of interest in that they must be the westernmost record for these species from the Himlayas.

#### 10. European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Seen on February 13, 2000 in Islamabad

at the foot of the Margalla Hills. A second European robin seen by Juha Kylänpää in Kao forest below Dunga Gali, Hazara district on December 28, 2000. Major Erkki Kallio, a keen and reputed birdwatcher in his own country, was working with UNMOGIP as a Military Observer, and based in Islamabad at the time, and Juha Kylänpää is a missionary based in the NWFP, who has already published two articles of his bird sightings in Pakistan, in the Journal of the Oriental Bird Club, *Forktail* and he was the individual who picked up a wing of the redwing *Turdus illiacus* deposited by me in the BNHS Collection, as mentioned above. I was so surprised at the robin sightings that Major Kallio kindly sent me a slide that he took of the bird, and there is no mistaking his identification. I understand from him that it has also been recorded in India for the first time in 1999 at Rajouri, also in Poonch, and this information was passed on by Erkki to the Indian Deputy High Commissioner Sudhir Vyas in Islamabad, who also writes in the *JBNHS*.

I think it is important to record unusual distributional records where they represent extensions of known range. Sadly, so often there is shrinking of range of so many species, and in the case of the European robin it is not normally considered a long distance migrant.

February 23, 2000

T. J. ROBERTS

*Cae Gors, Rhoscefnhir,  
Nr. Pentraeth,  
Anglesey LL75 8YU,  
United Kingdom.*

## 25. SOME INTERESTING BIRD RECORDS FROM THE DELHI AREA

A four-year posting at Delhi from mid-1995 to mid-1999 provided me with an opportunity to review the bird life in the area, and compare it with notes made during earlier periods of stay in 1977-79 and 1984-86 (Vyas 1995). In ten years, the city of Delhi has grown

phenomenally, particularly to the east and south, and some of the most fruitful birding localities no longer exist. The formerly bird-rich marshes near the Coronation Pillar and Model Town in north Delhi have been drained and built upon. Large areas of reed beds about 5 km south of

Okhla along the Agra canal near Madanpur village, which were a known locality near Delhi for species such as ruddy-breasted crake *Porzana fusca*, are now badly degraded, encroached upon and partially covered by landfills. Sultanpur Lake near Gurgaon, located 48 km south-west of Delhi, was dry during the winters of 1997-98 and 1998-99, depriving the area of one of its most productive sites. Increased cultivation and construction in the neighbourhood of Sultanpur Lake, and the drainage of marshes and seasonal inundations in the surrounding area, has also reduced its attractiveness for birds. On the other hand, the pond area of the new Okhla Barrage (now Okhla Barrage Bird Sanctuary) has emerged as an excellent new site, attracting a number of water and marsh species, in spite of the extremely high level of water pollution. The bird habitats of Okhla Barrage have been described by Urfi (1993). For other sites referred to in this note Ganguli (1975) provides a general reference.

The following are new or interesting records for the Delhi area, and some notes on bird population trends made during this period.

**Yellow bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*, Chestnut bittern *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus* and Black bittern *Dupetor flavicollis*:** All appear to have increased considerably in the Delhi area compared to the 1980s. The expansion of reedbed habitats in the Okhla reservoir area consequent to the construction of the Okhla Barrage is a likely reason. Yellow and chestnut bitterns were found common and breeding (juveniles seen) at Okhla between May 4 and end August. Black bitterns also appeared at Okhla from early May, and one was recorded as late as October 12, 1997 in reed beds near Madanpur.

**Great bittern *Botaurus stellaris*:** One bird was flushed from a reedbed at Sultanpur on December 25, 1996. There are old 19th century hunting records from about Delhi [Anon (= Editors) 1949], but I know of no subsequent

mention for Delhi specifically.

**Glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*:** Formerly recorded irregularly about Delhi (Hutson 1954, Ganguli 1975), but it was not noted in the 1970s and 1980s. It seems to have reappeared, with about 25 present at Sultanpur in the winters of 1995-96 and 1996-97. The lake was dry in winter 1997-98.

**Bar-headed goose *Anser indicus*:** Numbers appear to have fallen considerably in the Delhi area over the last ten years. Compared to a minimum of 1,500-2,000 at Sultanpur in winter 1985-86, numbers both at Sultanpur and Okhla did not exceed 10 in the winters of 1995-96, 96-97 and 97-98.

**Common shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*:** Unlike earlier, this species was regularly recorded during the observation period at Okhla in winter, with 11 through December 1995, 12 on March 16, 1997 and 14 through February 1998.

**Greater scaup *Aythya marila*:** At least two birds, one male in breeding plumage and one female, were part of a mixed gathering of about 4,000 other duck, including common pochards *Aythya ferina*, tufted pochards *Aythya fuligula* and red-crested pochards *Rhodonessa rufina* at Okhla Barrage on February 22, 1998. This species has been listed for Delhi by Ali and Ripley (1968) and, Abdulali and Pandey (1978), but is not mentioned by Ganguli (1975).

**Besra sparrowhawk *Accipiter virgatus*:** One bird was observed a little after noon on December 30, 1997 in a thickly wooded patch in the Delhi Zoological Park. The bird flew into the canopy of a large tree where it perched; turning occasionally to ward off attacks by mobbing house crows *Corvus splendens*. Thus, I could observe the bird well for about five minutes, at about 20 m range with 10 x 50 binoculars. It appeared about the same size or slightly smaller than the shikra *Accipiter badius* and (i) dark brownish-slaty above, darker and much less clear grey than shikra, no pale eyebrow; (ii) noticeably square-cut, brownish-

grey tail with three broad dark bars running across (including the central tail feathers), very conspicuous; (iii) dark grey cheeks contrasting in a clear line with a whitish throat, which showed a clear, broad, dark, mesial stripe and a few dark brown streaks in a restricted band on the lower throat; (iv) entire breast and belly barred broadly with rufous (much more coarsely than is usual in shikra), with each rufous bar somewhat wavy and edged with a thin dark line above and below; thigh feathers also barred, but the bars narrower and browner, (v) eyes pale yellow, cere greyish, not contrastingly noticeable, legs yellow. It did not show a reddish shield on the breast. This bird is definitely not *Accipiter nisus* or *badius*, and, on the basis of the characters above, I identify it as a besra sparrowhawk, probably a female bird. Through December 1997, much of northern India including Delhi had an extended spell of cold and very foggy weather, which may explain the presence of this bird out of its usual range. I do not know of any earlier record of besra sparrowhawk from the Delhi area.

**Eurasian hobby *Falco subbuteo*:** There are very few records of this species from Delhi. One was hunting over trees in the evening in central New Delhi on September 21, 1997.

Other, more generalized comments on birds of prey populations about Delhi may be made. These are based on a subjective comparison with my own records in the 1970s and 1980s (Vyas 1995). There has been a striking decline in the numbers of *Aquila* eagles wintering about Delhi. I had no records of the eastern Imperial *A. heliaca* or tawny eagles *A. rapax* in the years 1995-1998. Steppe eagles *A. nipalensis* are now scarce in Delhi's immediate vicinity, whereas up to the 1980s they were a feature of the riverain tract along the Jamuna river. While spotted eagles *A. clanga* still appeared in small numbers about Okhla and Sultanpur, I had no records of Pallas' fish-eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* or osprey *Pandion haliaetus* in the 1990s. Similarly, there were no records of laggar

*Falco jugger*, though single red-headed falcons *Falco chicquera* appeared in February and July 1998 at Okhla and Sultanpur respectively. The number of Indian white-backed vultures *Gyps benghalensis* has fallen dramatically, in keeping with trends reported widely from elsewhere in India (Rahmani 1998). This decline was evident even between 1996 and 1999, and several occupied nests within city limits in New Delhi were abandoned. The species bred commonly in the city earlier, but in 1999, I could count just three occupied nests on roadside trees in a restricted residential area in New Delhi, compared to 18 in this area in 1996.

**Demoiselle crane *Grus virgo*:** There are not many records from Delhi, and usually of small numbers. Two flocks, of about 80 and 26 birds respectively, were seen at Okhla in the morning of September 29, 1996, flying in from the east and then turning north along the river. The number of common crane *Grus grus* has dropped sharply. While a few hundred used to winter regularly about Sultanpur in the 1970s and 1980s, I recorded only three during the current period at Sultanpur on December 26, 1996.

**Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea*:** Its earlier recorded locality in the area, the marshes near the Coronation Pillar in north Delhi, no longer exists. Instead, watercocks (mostly males in breeding plumage, but also females) were recorded quite commonly, and almost certainly breeding, at Okhla between June 22 through August each year from 1996 to 1998. Their numbers have increased, with up to five individual males seen foraging separately one evening. Birds were noted flying around in the evenings in June and early July, and dropping into marsh; often seen feeding in open grassy patches in the mornings and evenings.

**White-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*:** The species has occasionally been seen in breeding plumage about Delhi in May-June (Ganguli 1975, Vyas 1995). On October 20,

1996, there was at least one with a scattered flock of whiskered terns *Chlidonias hybridus* at Okhla in (first) winter plumage; on August 30, 1997, there were three with whiskered terns and gull-billed terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* over flooded fields near Madanpur village. All showed the characteristic head pattern (black eye patch clearly separated from black nape, no streaking on crown), noticeably smaller bills, whitish-grey rumps and absence of any dark patches on side of breast. On the latter occasion, one bird had the solid brown mantle of the juvenile white-winged. Their flight action was slightly quicker, with deeper wing beats, than nearby whiskered terns which offered opportunities for direct comparison. It may well turn out to be a regular, but overlooked, autumn passage migrant.

**Black tern *Chlidonias niger*:** On September 28, 1998, two *Chlidonias* terns at the Okhla Barrage were noted flying together, quartering an area of shallow water along the bank with abundant submerged weeds, in close proximity to but separate from large numbers of whiskered terns which were mostly in winter plumage or moulting from juvenile to first winter plumage. They were observed with 10 x 50 binoculars, at times as close as 15 m range. Attention was first attracted to them because of their head pattern, strikingly different from the extensively streaked crown, framed below by a black line behind the eyes and around the nape, of the whiskered terns. These two birds showed (i) a solid black "skull-cap" contiguous with a broad black eye patch curving back and down from each eye; (ii) grey mantle with a few dark brown feather edges on the lower scapulars; (iii) no marked pattern on the wings; (iv) pale grey rump and tail, the latter with an admixture of white towards the bases of the feathers; (v) white underparts with very noticeable dark grey patches on sides of breast; on one bird the side patches were extensive (extending quite far down into the white breast), smudgy and medium-grey, and on the other, they were smaller, more sharply

defined and darker grey; (vi) smaller bills compared to whiskered terns nearby; (vii) no difference could be noted in flight action. I have seen black terns in winter plumage (outside India) earlier, and, after consulting available literature, I am convinced of my identification of these two birds as black terns, moulting out of juvenile into first-winter plumage. The species has been recorded once for Delhi by H.W. Alexander (Hutson 1954, Ali and Ripley 1969).

**Indian plaintive cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus*:** Vocal, and seen about Okhla, Gurgaon and Sultanpur from late-May/June onwards through 1996-1998. Quite common, as three calling males were recorded over a 2 km transect along the river, south of Okhla on June 1, 1997. Although there are earlier scattered records, this cuckoo now appears to have established itself about Delhi as a regular summer/monsoon breeding visitor. I had neither seen nor heard this species in Delhi in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Bengal bush-lark *Mirafra assamica* (race *assamica*):** This species is not listed for Delhi in the earlier checklists, and may be a new arrival in the area with the creation of suitable habitat due to the formation of the Okhla Barrage. It was present and probably breeding through 1996-98 at Okhla and Madanpur, in overgrown fallow fields adjacent to marshy depressions and borrow-pits. The birds were tame, and afforded frequent opportunities for close observation when they fed along earth-tracks. It was noted between early March and October 12, and may possibly be a year-round resident, though it was not seen in winter. Persistent song and display flights in the mornings between March 16 - August 17, with a maximum of three displaying birds (presumed to be males) and at least one more present at Okhla, one bird still singing and suspected nesting (dropping into grass repeatedly at the same spot) on August 17, 1997. One was seen at Madanpur on October 12, 1997.

Attention was first attracted to the bird by

its different song flight compared to little eastern skylarks *Alauda gulgula* displaying in the same area. It is very different also compared to that of red-winged bush-larks *Mirafra erythroptera*, which are not in this habitat. The bird soared fairly high in the air, alternately fluttering a little way up and then gliding a little way down with wings in a V, tail partly fanned and legs hanging loose all the time, thus executing a continuous series of short shallow dips or scallops in the air; this continued for several minutes before gliding down to the ground. A high-pitched, rather hoarse, thin, song accompanied each dip, each phrase sounding like "i'eezz" of less than one second duration. The birds displayed almost continuously in the morning, at least till 1030 hrs. I would like to point out that this song flight does not match that described for this species in Ali and Ripley (1972), but is closer to the description in Alstrom (1998).

**Common raven *Corvus corax*:** Two birds were seen at the Buddha Jayanti Gardens, New Delhi Ridge, on March 20, 1996. One, chased by a house crow, soared up to circle and soar with a group of Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, another flew across the gardens to perch in a leafless silk-cotton tree, where it was studied through binoculars from about 25 m, at about 0930 hrs in bright light. A house crow mobbed it, offering direct comparison of size. The bird appeared almost twice the size of the house crow, the size difference evident both in flight and at rest; broad wedge-shaped tail noticeable even at rest; massive beak, not heavily bowed as a jungle crow's; forehead not steeply rising from the bill as in a jungle crow; highly

glossy plumage; throat hackles visible, but not protruding; stately flight, with slower wing-beats than house crow; and its soaring silhouette were all distinctive. The birds did not call. I have never recorded soaring behaviour in house crows, or the jungle crows *Corvus macrorhynchos* that turn up occasionally about Delhi. There have been only a few old records from the Delhi area, where it was considered as rare or vagrant (Ali and Ripley 1972, Ganguli 1975).

**Bristled grass-warbler *Chaetornis striatus*:** I recorded at least 5 birds (including 3 singing and displaying males) in areas of waterlogged grass and reeds, and in a reed-covered borrow-pit at Okhla, between August 4 and mid-September 1996. The birds were seen by several members of the Delhi Bird Club, photographed and reported to the Oriental Bird Club (Grewal 1996). In 1997, there were none at Okhla - there had been massive disturbance of the reedbeds due to malaria control operations - but at least one displaying and calling bird was present in reedbeds near Madanpur in August 1997. There was no evidence of its presence in 1998. I can trace only one earlier record from Delhi, in 1962 (Donahue 1967).

May 23, 2000

SUDHIR VYAS

Deputy High Commissioner,  
High Commission of India,  
G-5 Diplomatic Enclave,  
Islamabad (Pakistan).

C/o DB Section,  
Ministry of External Affairs,  
South Block, New Delhi 110 001,  
India.

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## 26. THE GHARIAL *GAVIALIS GANGETICUS* IN INDRAVATI RIVER?

Occurrence of the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) in River Mahanadi, Orissa was often thought to be an exception. However, data presented in Singh and Bustard (1982a, 1982b) and Singh (1992) suggested occurrence of gharial in all major rivers of Orissa and in the Godavari in Andhra Pradesh. There was no information, then, from the River Indravati, Madhya Pradesh State.

When one of us (MKR) was in the Indravati area during 1981, a person informed of the occurrence of a long snouted crocodilian in the river some 16-20 years earlier, estimated to be around the late 1960s. The description obviously referred to the gharial, and differed from the description of the short snouted mugger (*Crocodylus palustris*). In 2000, when other people in the same area were interviewed by MKR, they had no idea of the occurrence of the gharial in Indravati river. The people questioned were young and probably had had no exposure to the previous generation's experiences. The

presence of gharial in the River Indravati appeared to have vanished from the memory of the locals.

Nonetheless, the single piece of information about the gharial's occurrence in Indravati in the late 1960s bridges the gap in the distribution of the gharial, strengthening the view that *Gavialis gangeticus* had a continuous distribution from River Mahanadi to Godavari along eastern India.

Any further information on the gharial's occurrence in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh will be gratefully acknowledged.

January 18, 2002

M. K. RANJITSINH  
Krishnasar, 5, Tiger Lane,  
Off W6 Lane, Sainik Farms,  
New Delhi 100 062, India.

L.A.K. SINGH  
Similipal Tiger Reserve, Baripada,  
Orissa 757 002, India.

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## 27. COMMUNAL EGG LAYING BY *CNEMASPIS INDICA* IN MUKURUTHI NATIONAL PARK, WESTERN GHATS, INDIA

(With one text-figure)

Indian geckoes are largely nocturnal, except species belonging to the genera *Cnemaspis* and *Phelsuma*. The biology of species referred to *Cnemaspis* is poorly known. In the present paper,